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ABSTRACT

Through children's self-assessment, teachers and parents have the opportunity to clarify what the children see as their strengths in learning, whether the learning goals that teachers and parents set for a child are shared by the child, and what skills the child feels he or she needs to improve. This paper examines how young children's self-assessment is positively influenced by the experience of engaging in project learning. Children ages 3 to 5 years who were enrolled in a preschool housed in a midwestern university whose curriculum was based on the Project Approach were interviewed to determine whether they would self-assess, how they self-assess, and to what degree they might self-assess. While the children appeared to effectively engage in self-assessment in the classroom context, in the after-school interviews, the children initially showed little evidence of engaging in self-assessment or supporting their responses with standards and criteria while self-assessing. After the interview design was changed--pairing the children and offering Legos to manipulate during the interview--the children were more willing to respond in depth. Data indicated that the children might have responded more comfortably in the context of the classroom during typical class routines rather than in formal interviews held after school. (Author)

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Children's Self-Assessment

Betty J. Liebovich

Abstract

Through children's self-assessment, teachers and parents have the opportunity to clarify what the children see as their strengths in learning, whether the learning goals that teachers and parents set for a child are shared by the child, and what skills the child feels he or she needs to improve. This paper examines how young children's self-assessment is positively influenced by the experience of engaging in project learning. Children ages 3 to 5 years who were enrolled in a preschool housed in a midwestern university whose curriculum was based on the Project Approach were interviewed to determine whether they would self-assess, how they self-assess, and to what degree they might self-assess. While the children appeared to effectively engage in self-assessment in the classroom context, in the after-school interviews, the children initially showed little evidence of engaging in self-assessment or supporting their responses with standards and criteria while self-assessing. After the interview design was changed—pairing the children and offering Legos to manipulate during the interview—the children were more willing to respond in depth. Data indicated that the children might have responded more comfortably in the context of the classroom during typical class routines rather than in formal interviews held after school.

This paper examines how young children's self-assessment is positively influenced by the experience of engaging in project learning. Assessment, according to Hills (1992), "involves the multiple steps of collecting data on a child's development and learning, determining its significance in light of the program goals and objectives, incorporating the information into planning for individuals and programs, and communicating the findings to parents and other involved parties" (p. 43). Self-assessment, in this paper, is defined as thoughtful consideration of project work completed by preschool children.

The purpose of having children engage in self-assessment is to help them determine what they think is their most gratifying and well-done work and what goals they set for themselves and for evaluation purposes. When self-assessing, children use criteria and standards to evaluate their work. In *Engaging Children's Minds*, Katz and Chard (2000) write that "teachers can help children to adopt criteria or develop rubrics for evaluating their efforts by encouraging them to think about whether the work is as *clear, detailed, accurate,* or as *complete* as it could be..." (p. 17). A child engaging in self-assessment gives a teacher and parents the opportunity to clarify for themselves what the child articulates as his or her strengths in learning, to determine whether the learning goals that teachers and parents set for a child are shared by the child, and to determine what skills the child thinks he or she needs to improve. The adults may compare the child's responses with what they have targeted.

To some, this approach to assessment may seem an unlikely one for teachers and children to attempt. Children in the U.S. school system have not traditionally been socialized to discuss their work with teachers, parents, or peers, or to critically examine what they learn. Typically, children's work is evaluated by teachers or parents as good/bad and right/wrong. However, self-assessment may be a useful alternative for evaluating children's academic progress and setting educational goals.

Standardized assessments primarily focus on the teacher as evaluator and the child as the performer. Few, if any, alternatives to standardized tests directly involve the student in the process of assessment. The child's work may be collected and preserved in a portfolio. Written

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observations by an adult, typically the teacher, may also become part of the overall academic assessment. Checklists with or without accompanying comments are also considered an alternative assessment approach. But none of these strategies allows for the child's input or permits the child the option of becoming involved in the educational goal setting or evaluation of the learning process.

Self-assessment allows the child and teacher to become partners in the learning process and gives both the opportunity to develop goals for the individual child. By encouraging a child to critically analyze her or his learning process, the child is afforded the opportunity to take control of his or her learning and creates an arena for independence and ownership of the learning process.

The age at which children begin to be capable of effectively engaging in self-assessment is undetermined. Stipek (1984) ascertained that "three and four year old children were quite capable of processing the past performance information and of applying that information in their judgements about future performance" (p. 161). Guice and Johnston (1995) indicated in their research that responses from the third-grade children they interviewed showed the most thoughtful self-assessment as compared to the other age groups they interviewed. Hillyer and Ley (1996) interviewed second-grade children and found that they were effective in their self-assessment techniques. Research has shown success in self-assessment with children from 3 years old to third grade. While some researchers confidently report specific ages at which children engage in self-assessment, there is no consensus about the age at which children can truly begin to effectively engage in self-assessment.

Determining whether a child effectively engages in self-assessment involves subjective evaluation of a child's responses to questions about his or her work while self-assessing. Interviewing a child is one approach to discovering whether a child effectively engages in self-assessment. The teacher can take the role of interviewer, asking the children key questions to stimulate thought and consideration about the child's work in school (Guice & Johnston, 1995; Hillyer & Ley, 1996). Children responding to questions relating directly to their work is a first step toward effective self-assessment. Does the child respond confidently? Are the responses to the questions thoughtful? Does the child give details about her or his work when probed further? Will the child give specific examples of work when asked to clarify? These questions encourage the children to interpret their experiences, think critically and deeply about their work, and offer support for their responses.

Methods

Participants

The 3- to 5-year-old children who participated in this study are enrolled in a preschool program sponsored and housed in a major midwestern university. Of the 25 children and families enrolled in the preschool classroom, 20 families gave written permission to interview their children. Of the 20 children whose families gave permission for their child to participate, 11 were male and 9 were female; three boys were 3 years old, four boys were 4 years old, and four boys were 5 years old; four girls were 3 years old and five girls were 4 years old. Three children are bilingual, with English being their second language. Only one of the three children uses English fluently. Of the 20 children who returned consent forms to be interviewed, 13 were interviewed. Due to time constraints, scheduling conflicts, and language skill levels, I was not able to interview all 20 children for whom I had permission.

The children attend the preschool five days a week from 8:30 a.m. until noon. The curriculum method used in this classroom is the Project Approach. The children are encouraged to guide much of their own learning through questioning their environment on specific topics and finding answers to those questions. The teachers facilitate the children's learning process by helping them form questions, assisting the children in gathering information and materials to answer the questions, and then offering the children opportunities to create concrete representations of their findings.

I am one of the children's teachers in the preschool classroom, and all of the children interviewed have been in the classroom since September of 1999. Some of the children have been enrolled in the same

classroom since September 1998 and have had me as one of their teachers for their entire experience with the preschool. The children and I are very familiar with each other within the context of the classroom environment.

As part of the learning process, adults ask the children questions to help the children articulate their findings and to help the teachers determine where the children will want to go with their learning and investigations. The questions asked of the children require that they think deeply about their work and that they offer explanations about their thought processes while engaged in their work. Very often, the children are asked to discern whether a concrete representation is complete and explain why it is complete or what needs to be done to the representation to make it complete. The learning process in the Project Approach also includes peers questioning each other's representations and offering suggestions for improving or elaborating on particular points of the embodiment of the investigation.

Interview Procedures

One of the stipulations in gaining access to the children in this preschool was that the children be interviewed after class ended for the day. I made individual arrangements with each family to interview the children at noon, upon dismissal of the entire group of preschoolers. The children who were interviewed stayed with me in the classroom and were re-joined with their families at the conclusion of the interview.

A second stipulation in gaining access to the children was that the interviews be conducted in the room used for dramatic play during class sessions. The classroom area is divided into three separate rooms, each offering distinct experiences for the children. One room houses computers and puzzles so that the children may work quietly, alone or in small groups. Another larger room, which is situated between the computer room and the dramatic play room, is where a large proportion of the children spend most of their time. The dramatic play room is positioned furthest from the door that the children and families use to enter and exit the classroom. Because of the flow of traffic at dismissal time, the dramatic play room offered the most quiet atmosphere for conducting interviews.

Each child was approached for the interview, and I requested verbal permission from the child prior to entering the dramatic play room where the interview would be conducted. With the child's affirmative response to the invitation, I explained to the child what would transpire before, during, and after the interview: (1) the interchange would be tape recorded, (2) I would be asking questions about the children's experiences in school, and (3) the child's responses would be written down later for the interviewer to use in a class at the university and for a paper for the class.

Initially, the interviews were conducted one on one with me. The child sat in a chair at a low table with me sitting across from the child. Each child was asked the following three questions (or a close variation) during the interview: (1) What do you do best in school? (or What do you do well in school?), (2) What do you think you could do better in school? and (3) What do you need help with in school?

The first three interviews were only audiotaped. After procuring a camcorder, I videotaped and audiotaped the rest of the interviews. The children who were interviewed individually reacted similarly to those who were only audiotaped. The questions were answered simply, and the children sat rigidly in their chairs or fidgeted while sitting in their chairs. The data collected were minimally more useful than those collected with the children only being audiotaped. The children were accustomed to having interchanges with their friends and peers in the classroom, and being interviewed alone, by their teacher, was unfamiliar and disconcerting to them.

After reviewing the data, I changed the interview setting. The children were interviewed in pairs, at the same time, and were encouraged to interact with each other and to play with Legos prior to the interview taking place. The children eagerly engaged with the Legos and, as they played, asked questions about the equipment I set up. The children were not concerned about the camcorder or the audiotape being next to or in front of them as they played. Most children ignored the presence of the machinery during the interview.

Analysis

To What Extent Will Children Self-Assess?

The children initially showed little depth in the responses given to the questions about their work at school. The responses to the questions posed were direct and simplistic. Answers were limited to "yes," "no," "uh huh," or bodily gestures such as a shoulder shrug or a head nod. When the children were asked to elaborate and encouraged to give details to explain their answers, they either did not respond or changed the subject to something unrelated to the discussion. An example of this behavior occurred in an interview with a 3-year-old girl who was audiotaped only. She said that painting is what she did best in school:

I: When you paint, what is it that you do best?
C: Color.
I: The color is best? Tell me more about the color being the best.
C: Because I can use things to draw with.
I: You can use things to draw with? What is it that you draw?
C: ...m...(shrugs shoulders)
I: (Writes down what is being said.)
C: (Looks at the notebook in front of the interviewer.) Those are a lot of words.
I: Yeah. I'm drawing out the words. You tell me what you do, and I write down the words.
C: (Nods her head.)
I: So you say you paint the best. Is there something in particular that you paint that you feel is the best?
C: No.

This child emphatically answered that when she paints, color is her best work, but she would not engage in a conversation investigating the answer more deeply. The interviewer allowed the girl to stray from the topic of painting to talk about the note-taking, but the child would not be re-directed to discuss her work in painting. There was a painting by the child on the wall in the room where the interview took place, and the child noticed the painting, commented that it was her painting but refused to discuss the painting when asked about color being the best part of her painting. Even though this child was able to tell me what she thought was her best work, she would not describe why it was her best work or what standards led her to the criterion of painting being her best work.

Another child, a 4-year-old boy, explained that basketball was his best work in school. While this is not necessarily the type of work to which the interviewer was referring, the child did explain in a little more detail *why* he felt that basketball was his best work:

I: Basketball. Tell me a little bit more about what is best about basketball?
W: I get good shots.
I: What is a good shot?
W: That means when you get a good hoop.
I: A good hoop? Tell me a little more about that. A good shot would mean that...
W: Like...like this. (Demonstrates what a good shot is by using hands and imaginary ball in a hole in the middle of the Lego table.) Umm...if I, if I wanted to make a ball go into here...
I: umm...hmm...(agreement)
W: And I would go like...(whooshing noise). And it went in there (indicating the hole in the Lego table).
I: Okay...so you're looking for the ball to go into the hoop?
W: Uhh huh...(agreement)
I: And you do that pretty frequently?
W: YES...(quick and emphatic)
I: What would be a bad shot?
W: Not getting it in the hoop.
I: Not getting it in the hoop.
W: Like this (whooshing noise and hand gestures to indicate what a bad shot would be).

This child was very clear about basketball being his best work. While it is not a part of the curriculum in the classroom, it is part of the outdoor experience during a typical preschool day. This child defined what a "good shot" and a "bad shot" would be, which indicates that he has a clear idea of standards and criterion for shooting baskets in basketball.

R., a 5-year-old boy, was able to identify and articulate what his best work was in school, but he could not define what made it his best work. He did not attempt to change the subject or avoid discussing his best work. He just would not elaborate on the standards or criterion of what was his best work:

I: Of all those things you mentioned: rug toys, blocks, Legos, computers—of all those things, what is your best work at school?
R: Legos.
I: The Legos is your best work. And why do you say it is your best?
R: Because I usually don't know how to do other structures.
I: Oh...tell me more about that. When you build a Lego structure and it is your best...what do you think is your best work? Why is it your best work?
R: mmm...mmmm....I don't know.
I: Do you have a Lego structure that you decided to keep?...instead of taking it apart and putting it back in the box?
R: mmm...(shakes his head "no").

There was a Lego structure that R. had created and left on the Lego table right next to him. The interviewer referred to it later in the interview, but R. did not choose to give details leading to standards and criteria for the work he had produced.

In an interview with two boys, a 5-year-old and a 4-year-old who were friends, the 5-year-old was very explicit in answering probing questions about what was his best work. These two are friends outside of school, ride together to and from preschool, and prefer engaging in activities together when offered the choice to do so. Of the two, the 5-year-old is the leader, but the 4-year-old was very willing to answer questions I posed. The 5-year-old gave wonderful detail about his best work in school:

I: E., you were telling me last week about puzzles and that you're really good at puzzles. Do you still feel that way?
E: Yeah.
I: Why is it that you're good at puzzles?
E: Well, because I practiced a lot, and my grandma is an expert at puzzles. She's *so* good at puzzles.
I: Is she?
E: Yeah.
I: And what makes her so good at puzzles?
E: Well, she's practiced since she was young, I think.

E. was very confident in his own abilities with puzzles as he compared his skills to an expert, his grandmother. He was also very clear about how she became an expert—she had been doing puzzles since she was young. E. expressed his criterion, being good at puzzles, and his standards, his grandmother is an expert so he looks to her as a role model of what a puzzle expert is like and how she became an expert.

These children have had a great deal of experience with questions from adults about their work in the classroom. The children are often asked to explain their work to peers and ask for ideas for adding or changing what they have done, whether it is a handwritten book or a structure created from scrap materials. However, some of the children interviewed were hesitant to answer questions and elaborate on their responses, while others explained in detail what their criteria and standards were.

Does Age Affect the Children's Responses?

Age seemed to have a little impact on the responses received. The 4-year-old children followed the flow of the interview and were less likely to steer the conversation away from the questions posed. The children who were 4 and 5 years old and were in the preschool for their second year were more likely to be at ease and respond more completely during the interview than those who were 3 years old or were in the preschool for the first time. Even though the older and more experienced children stayed on task during the interview, the format of the interview appeared to have more impact on the fluidity and expansiveness of their responses than did their age.

Triangulating the Data: What Do the Parents Predict?

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend parent/teacher conferences with some of the families whose children participated in the interviews. The

parents were briefed on the research I conducted, the purpose of the study, the interview setting, and the questions posed to their children. I asked the parents to predict what their child's response would be to the three questions leading the children in self-assessment: What is your best work at school? What work, if any, could you do better in school? and What, if anything, do you need help with at school? Many parents accurately predicted what their child's responses were.

The parents of E., a 5-year-old boy who identified puzzles as his best work, had not considered puzzles his best work. They had predicted that E. would say his best work was in pattern blocks, numbers, or using scissors. When learning of E.'s response about puzzles, they were not surprised. They immediately mentioned the grandmother who E. had identified as the puzzle expert against whom he rated himself and his expertise. When I asked the parents to predict what E. thought he could do better in school, the parents identified spelling, reading, and physical activities. E., however, identified his computer skills as something he could do better and explained that he sometimes has difficulty "getting out of a game," which he further clarified as meaning that he had trouble remembering the sequence of where to click the mouse to leave one function in order to enter another function. His parents were not surprised by this assessment and cited examples that E. had spoken of outside of class with them explaining his challenges with the computer.

The parents of a 4-year-old girl, J., who is completing her second year with me as one of her teachers, and who was interviewed simultaneously with her friend, accurately predicted J.'s assessment of her best work, but they were not on target about J.'s assessment of what she thought she could do better or what she thought she needed help with. J. said that dramatic play and stories were her best work, and her parents agreed. The parents explained to me how J.'s interest in dramatic play has always been strong and has become more complex, a comment that I understood and heartily agreed with. I explained the response J. gave me and told her parents how J. felt that she was especially good at puppet shows because she could make them scary, but not enough to make her peers stay away from her shows. Her parents predicted that J. would say she could do blocks better because she rarely chose them when given the opportunity for free play in the classroom or at home. However, J. felt that her problem-solving skills could be better and cited an incident in which she and her friend (with whom she was interviewed) were asked to leave their best work, dramatic play, because they were fighting and hurting each other instead of talking and solving problems. The parents remembered this incident vividly and finished the story before I concluded.

Results and Discussion

While the children had engaged in self-assessment in the classroom context during class hours, the initial interview method of determining whether they could self-assess provided little evidence of their abilities. Two 4-year-old boys, familiar with the classroom procedures of responding to queries about their work, did not show evidence of their experiences during the interview process. They were interviewed individually but were in the room together as the interviews were conducted. The boys each sat in a chair at a table opposite me for the interview. Responses were monosyllabic ("uh huh," "nope," and "yes"), simple, and took great effort on my part to elicit. The boys were hesitant to elaborate on their answers to the three questions posed about their schoolwork, often shrugging their shoulders or dropping their heads to avert their eyes and not answer. The children did not seem bothered by the presence of the camera or the tape recorder, but gave very quick and uncomplicated responses to the questions posed. The children were nervous during the interview process and changing the approach calmed the children so that they could respond more willingly and comfortably. The children interviewed subsequently responded better to interviews in which they engaged in play (Legos) and in which they were interviewed in pairs instead of one on one with the interviewer.

During the interviews that were audiotaped, the children sat rigidly in their chairs and hesitantly answered the questions I posed. The tape recorder is a small, hand-held device placed on the table between the child and me. Each child who was only audiotaped handled the recorder as it was engaged and kept his or her eyes either on me or the recorder.

The interviews took from 5 to 7 minutes for each child, and the interchange was stilted and appeared uncomfortable for the children.

Perhaps a better approach to gathering richer data would be to interview the children while they are engaged in activities during the class session. While this approach was not an option for this study, the approach may be available to others who wish to pursue this investigation. Children seem to respond most completely and confidently when they are comfortable and have a sense of control. When they are in the classroom, immersed in activities of their choice, they have a sense of control allowing them to relax and respond more naturally when asked questions. Also, when a child has work that he or she has produced in sight or available for reference, the child may respond more completely to questions posed. A concrete example may prompt more discussion and allow the child to physically point out what work is best and why, what work could be better and why, and with what the child needs help and why. The abstractness of having only mental recall may be too complex for the child. The concrete example gives the child an opportunity to jog the memory and point to examples rather than rely on memory alone.

Aside from the environment affecting the self-assessment process during this study, the children's routine was altered to accommodate the parameters of the stipulations for this project. The children were accustomed to gathering their belongings at dismissal time and going outdoors to meet someone who would pick them up. I altered that routine at the end of the school day and asked the children to self-assess when they were ready to move on to the next part of their day. It appeared that the children were tired and perhaps ready to shift into something different from the school routine, and I was asking them to postpone the shift that they were ready to make.

I had the advantage of working with these children in the classroom context for most of an academic year and some of them for almost two academic years. The children whom I interviewed were familiar with me, my style of interacting with them, and the environment in which they were interviewed. Even though some of the children were very tentative, at best, about participating in an interview, they trusted me enough to engage in a question-and-answer interchange. When analyzing the data I collected, I found that the personalities of each child showed in each interview, and some conclusions I made were based on my previous experiences with these children. Once I understood the challenges the interviews posed, namely the context and comfort level of the children, I could quickly make changes in the interview style and context to encourage more deeply considered responses from the children. Had I been in an unfamiliar setting and tried to interview children who were strangers to me, I believe the process would have been much more challenging than it was.

The age of the children seemed to have little effect on the responses they gave to the questions posed. While E., a 3-year-old girl, shrugged her shoulders and avoided answering questions, J., a 3-year-old boy, was very confident about his best work and articulated his thoughts during the interview. Both of these children are finishing their first year with the preschool but responded very differently to the interview questions. E., a 5-year-old boy, eagerly explained his success with puzzles, while R., another 5-year-old boy, was reluctant to answer questions posed and was very nervous about the procedure. E. is finishing his first year with the preschool, while R. is finishing his second year. Although the 4- and 5-year-old children might be expected to answer interview questions more completely and confidently, age appeared to have less impact than the context of the interview and the style in which the interview was conducted.

Children at the preschool level definitely engage in self-assessment, whether it be in a formal adult/child interchange or among themselves during classroom activities. This research project indicated that the environment and context in which children self-assess has as much to do with the depth and thought of the responses as the questions posed to evoke responses. As one of their teachers, I see the children self-assess spontaneously, daily, and effortlessly. As they sit in a group at a table and compare their modeling dough creations or discuss a structure being built in the block area, the children often confer as to what needs to happen next for improvement or modification. Their rich interchanges lead to modifications and adjustments that satisfy their vision of what is good

work. Once the children were removed from the routine of the classroom day and placed in a familiar room with an unfamiliar routine, they were less comfortable self-assessing and did not respond as they do in the classroom context. This study would do well to be repeated in the context of the children's typical day in the classroom, while engaged in familiar activities with the children they choose to interact with. Although I tried to put the children at ease by pairing them with a friend for the interview, they appeared uncomfortable with the interview process and offered less detailed self-assessment than what I had seen in the classroom. Perhaps capturing the children spontaneously self-assessing while engaging in classroom routines would offer richer responses and data for analysis.

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